



# EPA to announce standards for Bay-Delta water quality

By Cecily Burt  
STAFF WRITER

It's so easy to get lost among the finger-like rivers, sloughs and creeks that feed the Delta. The miles of waterways are a water skier's mecca and a fisherman's dream.

And for years, trouble brewed just beneath the surface as water users, environmentalists and state and federal agencies wrangled over who deserved to get the precious water: the dwindling fish populations or the people.

But the Delta's problems are about to take a turn for the better.

A year after being forced to step in and protect the Delta because the state had failed to do so, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today will present long-awaited water quality standards to protect endangered fish and restore water quality to the entire battered estuary while preserving the rights of water users.

The U.S. Department of Fish and Game and National Marine Fisheries Service are also expected to define critical habitat requirements to boost populations of endangered Delta smelt, winter-run chinook salmon and Sacramento splittail.

## Jump-start Delta

But, perhaps most importantly, for the first time since 1978, state officials are ready to announce a water quality plan that will eventually replace the federal standards as an adequate agenda to jump-start the Delta toward the long road to recovery for the next three years.

"All told, (the plans) should provide a comprehensive approach to ensuring fish habitats in the Bay and Delta are protected while minimizing impacts on water supplies for agriculture and urban water users," said EPA spokesman Bill Glenn. "We tried to look at these all together and integrate the requirements to come up with a plan that meets all the biological needs of the Delta."

The Delta and the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers that supply it with fresh water are the lifeblood of California's fishing, urban and agricultural communities.

Two-thirds of the state's population and millions of acres of agricultural land receive all or part of their water supplies from the Bay-Delta system.

The body of water was once home to 120 thriving species of fish. But years of pumping water through the state and federal water projects to users up and down the state have increased along with the state's ever-thirsty population.

The lack of fresh water pouring into the Delta has allowed salty Bay water to encroach farther in, boosting salinity levels and depleting the essential ingredients required for spawning once abundant species of chinook salmon, delta smelt and Sacramento splittail.

As the years passed and fish populations declined, a hodgepodge of laws and regulations were passed to

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protect the fish and restore the once pristine water supply to its original state.

Users found themselves trying to comply with federal statutes, from the Clean Water Act to the Endangered Species Act, and the Central Valley Project Improvement Act.

Business leaders moaned about the uncertainty of future water supplies in case federal agencies decided new fish species were threatened.

Agricultural and urban water users lined up on one side of the issue and environmentalists on the other.

And in the meantime, water was being pumped through the federal and state water pumps at record rates.

Federal and state officials had worked for months — and furiously the past two weeks — with urban water users and agricultural interests to meet today's deadline for unveiling a unified plan designed to protect the entire Delta ecosystem, not just one fish or another.

"It is a very important step to have the four agencies talking with a unified voice — we might actually have a package that everybody accepts without years of litigation," said Barry Nelson, executive director of Save San Francisco Bay Association.

And although it may fall short of what environmentalists had hoped for, it is a start. And it demonstrates an unprecedented show of cooperation between state and federal agencies.

In its draft proposal last year, the EPA had originally set 1.6 million acre-feet as the total amount of fresh water that could no longer be diverted from rivers feeding the Delta.

Agricultural and urban water users had insisted throughout they could give up no more than 1 million acre-feet, a limit environmentalists couldn't live with without other ways to ensure protections for fish, said Dave Behar, executive director of The Bay Institute.

At last notice, the two sides had compromised at 1.1 million acre-feet during drought years.

"This will be a unified approach — we can use the same unit of water to accomplish a number of different goals," said Tim Vendlinski, life scientist for the EPA.

#### Fresh water mix

The standards will include salinity criteria for Suisun Bay — the nursery of the Bay-Delta and the place where salt and fresh water mix. It also includes smolt survival targets in the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers because the side effects of pumping create flow reversals and drag the fish into the pumps, said Glenn.

The plan also includes fish spawning criteria in the lower San Joaquin and criteria for maintaining the Suisun Marsh tidal wetlands as a brackish marsh.

"We want to decide once and for all what's needed for endangered or threatened species, or any future species that comes down the pike," said EPA Bay-Delta expert Patrick Wright.